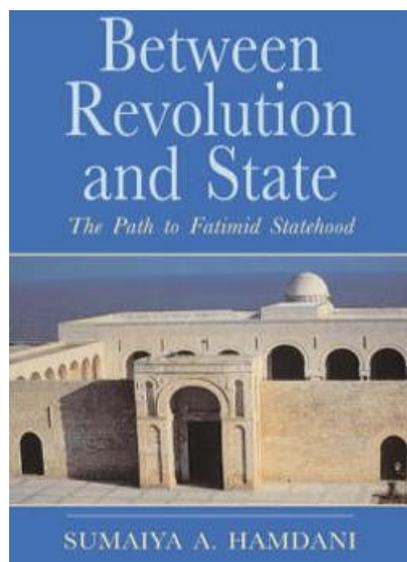




## Publication



### Between Revolution and State: The Path to Fatimid Statehood

by: [Dr. Sumaiya Hamdani](#)

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This publication examines the most important writings of a 10th-century jurist and theologian who was one of the most original thinkers of his age. Al-Qadi al-Nu'man was a central figure in the history of the early Fatimid period and his works constituted new and vital genres in Ismaili Shi'i literature. This development was necessitated by the transition from a Shi'i movement to statehood that the Fatimid regime was then undergoing. Born in North Africa, he converted to Ismaili Islam and rose quickly to become the Fatimids' most prominent judge or *qadi*. He served all four Fatimid caliphs of the North African period and produced at their behest a wide range of writings including history, biography, works on ritual and protocol as well as on *haqa'iq* or essential truths and *ta'wil* of scripture. After the Fatimid conquest of Egypt and Syria, al-Qadi al-Nu'man left Ifriqiya forever and travelled in the entourage of Caliph-Imam al-Mu'izz to the newly-founded city of al-Qahira where he died in 363/974 CE. Various members of his family continued to serve the Fatimid imams in prominent positions, and most importantly the Qadi's writings continued to be central to the Fatimid state and the Ismaili community.

*Between Revolution and State* examines the *zahiri* works of al-Nu'man, in particular his *Da'a'im al-Islam* (Pillars of Islam), *Ikhtilaf usul al-madhahib* (Differences Among the Schools of Law), *Kitab iftitah al-da'wa wa-ibtida' al-dawla* (The Beginning of the Mission and Establishment of the State), *Kitab al-majalis wa'l-musayarat* (The Book of Sessions and Excursions) and *Kitab al-himma fi adab atba' al-a'imma* (The Book of Etiquette Necessary for the Followers of the Imams). The first two discuss the law and the traditions that establish the validity of the *imamat* and its central position in Islam. The next two are works of history and biography and the last book deals with the tradition of protocol for the court and state in the Fatimid caliphate.

Dr Hamdani's book opens with a review of the literature on the Fatimids to date and then proceeds to describe the developments in early Islam that led to the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa. After discussing the background to the Fatimid rise to power and the situation in North Africa and the Middle East generally in the late 3rd/early 10th century, Dr Hamdani goes on to deal with the early period immediately after the Fatimid revolution and the overthrow of the Aghlabid rulers of Ifriqiya. This was the context for the production of many of al-Qadi al-Nu'man's writings which she then proceeds to discuss in the subsequent chapters.

The main thrust of Dr Hamdani's work is to highlight the *zahiri* or exoteric context of Fatimid rule, as opposed to earlier studies on the Ismailis and the Fatimids which have laid a great deal of stress on the esoteric or *batini* elements in their history. She argues that the administrative, legal, ceremonial and political demands that came with the establishment of an empire are as deserving of serious attention as the spiritual message that the Fatimids sought to spread amongst the Muslims of the age.

A careful study of the *Da'a'im al-Islam's* legal argument for *imamat* is first presented with the emphasis on adhering to the *sunna* of the Prophet and the traditions of the Imams and laying down the bases of the law under the rule of the Imams, including the vital point of designation or *nass* of Imam 'Ali by the Prophet at Ghadir Khumm. The *Ikhtilaf usul al-Madhahib* is also discussed in which al-Qadi al-Nu'man presented further developments in the arguments for the authority of the Imams as a source of law. Comparisons are made with the Twelver Shi'i works by Ibn Babawayh and al-Kulayni, and the work of al-Qadi al-Nu'man, where the former stressed the supernatural qualities of the imams in the Twelver tradition whereas the *Da'a'im*, Dr Hamdani stresses, sought to establish the political authority of the Fatimids in the here and now.

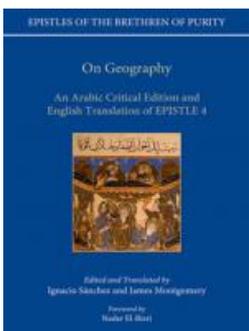
In his works on history and biography, al-Qadi al-Nu'man set down an early account of the rise to power of the Fatimids and the activities of the early Fatimid Caliph-Imams. Whilst the *Iftitah* was based on the records of eye-witness accounts as well as on *hadiths*, the *Majalis* consists of reports for which the Qadi himself is the source and they have an immediate and vivid quality to them as a result. The *Iftitah* is an organised and coherent narrative history with a clear objective (which has recently been published by the Institute in a fully annotated English translation by Dr Hamid Haji under the title [Founding the Fatimid State: The Rise of an Early Islamic Empire](#)). The *Majalis*, in contrast, is a collection of anecdotes which though more random in organisation and subject-matter still contains a great deal of important historical material that has yet to be fully utilised. Dr Hamdani's book is one of the very few works to deal with this fascinating source on the North African period of Fatimid history. With both these works al-Qadi al-Nu'man not only created the early historical traditions of the Fatimids but in so doing also established a particular style of historiography that was related to, yet distinct from, the historiographical traditions of the Sunni and Ithna'ashari communities, of *futuh* or conquest literature on the one hand and the *akhbar* regarding the imams on the other.

Finally, in the discussion of *Kitab al-himma*, Dr Hamdani brings the history of the Fatimids up to the conquest of Egypt and deals with the issues that the early rule of Egypt highlighted prior to the arrival of Caliph-Imam al-Mu'izz. The *Kitab al-himma* provided a blueprint for relations between the Fatimid caliph and his subjects, detailing the ceremonial for the court, state processions and other events, and how the courtiers and servants of the caliph should comport themselves in his presence. The *Kitab al-jihad* of *Da'a'im al-Islam* is also discussed in this chapter that deals with the expansion and consolidation of Fatimid achievement. This includes an *'ahd* written by the first Shi'i Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib which exhorts its addressee to exercise a policy of ethical governance, paying heed to his subjects and ruling wisely, mercifully and justly. This is linked to the period when Jawhar al-Siqilli was ruling Egypt on behalf of Imam al-Mu'izz and before the latter arrived in Egypt. It is described here as an Ismaili Shi'i example of the 'Mirrors for Princes' genre.

*From Revolution to State* concludes by pointing out that focusing on the *zahiri* works of al-Qadi al-Nu'man in no way discounts the importance of the *batini* works that he produced. Rather, it highlights the necessary attempt by the Fatimids to achieve a rapprochement with the Sunni world which they found themselves ruling.

After al-Nu'man's death, his works continued to be propagated in the *majalis* within Fatimid territories. Following the demise of the Fatimid state, his intellectual legacy was preserved among the Ismaili communities of Syria and Yemen. Indeed, among the Tayyibi Ismailis, the *Da'a'im al-Islam* is followed as the most authoritative source of Ismaili law.

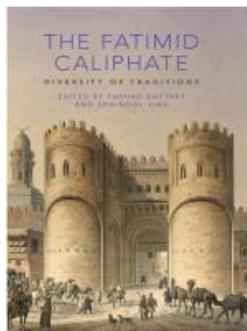
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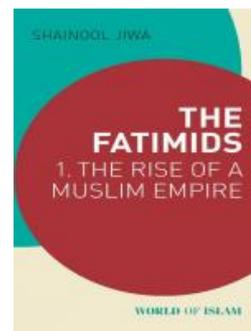
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